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## ABSTRACT

The framework for public school social workers offered in this article is based on the systems approach. The ideas presented might also be useful to social workers in general, and to secondary school social workers in particular. The article deals with the idea of a boundary, which is a line forming a circle around selected variables. Interrelationships between variables within the system and outside it can be examined, and appropriate interventions developed on this basis. The distribution of power (ability to influence the beliefs and behaviors of others in accordance with a wish or plan) within the system must also be considered. Communications systems are discussed; they have implications for the social worker's knowledge of his own role and the organization of his school or agency. The framework attempts to systematize the social worker's thinking and help him or her to intervene decisively and effectively. (Author/BP)

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# A FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

This article is intended to provide a conceptual framework for practice in school social work. The ideas presented here, however, are not unique to school social work but are applicable to generic social work practice and particularly relevant to all social work practice in secondary settings. The writer will, however, use examples principally from the public school setting.

The practical necessity for a workable conceptual framework is the impetus for this article. This framework should be general enough to be applied to a variety of widely different settings; it should be flexible enough that it can be adapted for different sized intervention units; and yet it should provide sufficient structure to be useful as a guide to practice.

This framework of knowledge required for developing effective social work methods and practice skills in the public schools is developed in this context: knowledge of system, knowledge of major organizational variables, knowledge of role, and knowledge of intervention strategies.

The general systems approach to knowledge building appears to be particularly well-suited to the profession of social work for several reasons. It is based on the assumption...that systems as systems, have certain discrete properties that are capable of being studied. Individuals, small groups - including families and organizations - and other complex human organizations such as neighborhoods and communities - in short, the entities with which social work is usually involved - can all be regarded as systems, with certain common properties... if the general systems approach could be used to order knowledge about the entities with which we work, perhaps, it could also be used as a means of developing a fundamental conception of the social work process itself.<sup>1</sup> The systems analytical model is a structured simplification of some part of reality that retains only those features regarded as essential for relating similar processes whenever and wherever they occur.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the author's premise is that the concepts of the general systems model can be used as a framework for viewing any unit into which social workers intervene. It is particularly useful for looking at phenomena such as the organization and program within a public school building, a meaningful unit for school social workers.

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Hall and Fagen have defined a system as "a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes."<sup>3</sup> Objects are simply the parts or components of systems, and these parts are unlimited in variety. Most systems in which social workers are interested consist of objects or variables, such as roles, behaviors, expectations, communications, influence, power relationships, etc. Attributes are properties of objects. Attributes important to social workers are: capacities, effectiveness and efficiency. Relationships tie the system together. It is, in fact, these relationships that make the notion of "system" useful.

Whether in the framework of systems or in traditional practice, social workers have used causality as a criterion for relationships. Instead of a simple criterion such as causality, this author takes the position that relationships to be considered in the context of a given set of objects depends on the situation at hand; important and interesting relationships being included, and trivial or unessential relationships being excluded. The decision as to which relationships are important and which trivial is influenced by the person(s) dealing with the situation, but is also greatly influenced by the focus of the professional training of the individual(s) viewing the situation. This definition of system alludes to two aspects of the system model that should be made more explicit: boundary and interdependency of objects.

First is the concept of boundary, which can be operationally defined as the line forming a circle around selected variables. The line may be thought of as rubber bands or springs which stretch or contract as the forces of energy inside and outside the boundary increase or decrease.<sup>4</sup> The form of energy in a school system, for example, may be classroom instruction in arithmetic, disciplinary actions towards pupils, discussion among a group of teachers about contract negotiations with the school board, or "staffings" in relation to an individual pupil's learning needs.

The variables outside the boundary that make up the system's environment can be examined and worked with one or more at a time to see the effects on interrelationships within the system. In this way, inter-relationships and even the boundaries are changed. Then when does an object belong to the system and when does it belong to the environment? If an object reacts with the system in the way described above, should it not be considered a part of the system? The answer is by no means definite. Subdivisions into two parts, system and environment, can be accomplished in many ways which are in fact quite arbitrary. It depends on the intentions of the individual(s) who is studying the particular situation as to which of the possible configurations of objects is to be taken as a system. This idea is particularly important to the social worker who is intervening in the system. The worker conceptualizes the system without himself/herself as a part, but anticipates the effect on the system of his/her interventions, and in turn, plans for the system when she is again outside the system, or a part of the system's environment. While this may seem to be an academic exercise, the writer proposes

that ability to conceptualize in this manner is basic to effective social work intervention.

The assumption that changing one object will affect another or other objects is basic to the system model. "The analytic model of system demands that we treat the phenomena and the concepts for organizing the phenomena as if there existed organization, interaction, interdependency and integration of parts and elements."

In assessing a situation we conceptually and tentatively assign a boundary, examine what is happening inside and impinging on the system and then readjust the boundary if indicated. This kind of conceptualization makes it possible to assess whether or not the relevant factors are accounted for within the system, whether the system be a school, a community, a family or an individual. The variables left outside the system can be introduced cognitively one or more at a time and the worker can hypothesize the effect(s) on the interrelations of the variables within the system. This kind of conceptualization makes it possible to deal with a number of variables at one time and tends to insure against the traps of the simple cause and effect analysis.

To develop this idea of the usefulness of systems concepts such as boundary and interdependence of objects let us use an example of a public school referral. The social worker receives from an elementary school principal a referral of a nine year old boy who is truant from school. The worker may conceptualize the system into which she is going to intervene as the boy and her strategy will be to meet with him once each week. On the other hand, she may add to that unit the parents. When she adds that variable she learns that the mother leaves for work at six in the morning after waking her son and reminding him to leave on time for school. After further consideration the worker decides to explore also the relationship of the teacher in this system. She learns that the mother leaves for work at six in the morning after waking her son and reminding him to leave on time for school. After further consideration the worker decides to explore also the relationship of the teacher in this system. She learns that the teacher has "just given up" because the child is so seldom in school and is so far behind in his work. At this point, the system which the social worker is planning to work with is the parents, child and teacher. But in the process of assessment, she learns that there are other children from the same public housing project that are also truant and these boys are often together when they are not in school. Further, she learns that on several occasions these boys have arrived at school before the doors are unlocked and that the custodian has ordered them off the playground until an hour when children are permitted to arrive at school. The worker may reconsider her system of intervention and may decide to develop a program in relation to a problem situation -- truancy in that elementary school.

The above example demonstrates the multicausal relationships that are so characteristic of the systems into which we

intervene. In the above example the cause of the problem was, of course, in part the boy's but the parent, his teacher, school practices, and his friends all were making major contributions to his truancy. The awareness of the flexibility of the system's boundary and the ability to assess the relationships between its objects is a powerful idea. It is a challenge to practitioners to develop a repertoire of skills to deal with different systems and to be able to formulate the boundaries of any system in such a way as to find the most appropriate unit into which to intervene.

The dimension of organization is present in all social phenomena that can be called a system. If there is no organization, there is no system. Thompson, in Approaches to Organizational Design has referred to the organizational field as "Variable rich." Triandis presented some 55 variables in a discussion of organizations.<sup>6</sup> Only three major variables will be discussed here, ones which are critical to analysis and intervention in different kinds of organizations: they are task, power and communication.

Organizations are established to perform a formalized, explicit, and public task; to produce an output. This has been called the formal task. In the public schools the formal task is that of educating children. A less formal task is that of maintaining the system - referred to as the informal or individual problem management task. Formal and informal tasks are highly interdependent. Successful organizational functioning requires a workable balance between the formal task and the informal or individual task. Problems in organizational functioning can often be traced, at least in part, to an imbalance between these two functions. For example, if a teacher maintains strict discipline through ridicule, she creates an imbalance between an informal task (maintaining orderly classroom) and a formal task (feelings of self esteem and confidence which contribute to learning).

Although a balance is necessary, the formal task of the organization may be very important to the individual. For example, a social worker in a school or hospital may identify primarily with the formal task of that particular agency. The structure for implementation of the formal task, however, will affect the degree to which personnel can interact with one another and the degree to which they are dependent. In the public schools it is a high degree of dependence in relationship to the formal task, yet the physical structure of the individual classrooms makes for greater autonomy.

Administrators in public schools may employ social workers to maintain the structure of the system and prefer not to see them as a part of the formal task function. For example, they would like the worker to deal with parents in such a manner as to keep them "happy with the system." They would not encourage the worker to advocate with parents in behalf of the needs of children in the system. It will be important for social workers to assess their perceived function in the organization by both



the administration and staff. Is this perception congruent with the worker's perception of his function in the system? This is a question any social worker will want to ask.

Power is the ability to influence the beliefs and behaviors of others in accordance with a wish or a plan. Or stated differently, is the control of a resource or resources which are essential to the functioning or survival of an individual or organization. Power, particularly for professionals, is directly related to knowledge, competence, relationships, values and responsibility. Professional persons often increase their power with increased competence.

In an organization the designation of power for the formal task typically comes from the suprasystem. For the informal task it comes from the group of individuals that inhabit that system. Power in relationship to either task may be acquired because responsibility is given. For example, many secretaries in public schools acquire power because the administrator delegates responsibility to them, usually not intending to relinquish power; however, since power and responsibility go together, it sometimes gets relinquished inadvertently.

The distribution of power in a system serves to organize the component individuals and subsystems for their tasks. The decision-making methods of the system are also structured by the power distribution. There is evidence to support the advisability of relatively wide distribution of power. Glidewell, et.al. (1966) did a review of studies of dispersal by teachers of emotional acceptance of self and others and social power (participation in decision making). From their review, a wide dispersion of social power and emotional acceptance by teachers had the following consequences: 1) more frequent interaction between students, 2) a wider dispersion of power among students as expressed in greater tolerance and resolution of opposing opinions, 3) greater student self-initiative, independence of opinion, and responsibility, 4) reduced inter-student conflicts, 5) increased student self-esteem and lower anxiety, and 6) an increase in the prevalence of adult-oriented moral values.<sup>8</sup>

Distribution of power is significant in the stability and productivity of an organization. Also, the degree of power serves to define the degree of allegiance to the organization. When the power is in the hands of a few, there is less stability and a lesser degree of allegiance. If, however, the dispersal of power is too wide, the effect is that of eliminating power altogether and the resulting loss of control would adversely affect both the formal and informal task of the organization.<sup>9</sup>

The social work practitioner will want to assess the distribution of power between and within systems and identify sources of power in the system whether these be centered in an individual or an organization. Approval by a power source will be necessary in order to gain access to the system. With a power assessment and approval by a power source the need to communicate emerges.

Communication may be defined as the transportation of information between or within systems or in a broader sense, the transportation of energy. Communication carries the essentials for system functioning, for example, task direction, incentives, penalties, formal rules, informal rules. John Dewey has suggested that the essence of community is communication, for without communication there cannot be that interaction by which common meanings, common life, and common values are established.

Katz and Kahn in The Social Psychology of Organizations have listed several characteristics of communications systems that seem helpful for social workers in evaluating communication systems in organizations: 1) Size of loop. What is the distance or number of people served by any one communication channel? Is this efficient? effective? 2) Repetition versus modification: Is the same message sent at all levels or is it modified? Why? Why not? 3) Feedback: Does the system simply acknowledge receipt of the information or does it also return new information to the source?

The following is an example of inadequate communication in a public school setting. The student council in a high school met and made up a list of problems in the school that they would like to work with the administration in solving. This list of problems was presented to the student council faculty representative and discussed with him. Some of the issues raised by the students involved overall school policy. The student council representative in turn took the list to the school principal. The school principal asked the council representative to meet with the students a few more times and see if these would not soon "simmer down." This is an example of a communication loop that involved less than an adequate number of people since the entire faculty were a part of the problems listed by the students. The communication loop was neither efficient or effective. Also, the feedback was simply to acknowledge receipt of the information, but it returned no information to the source.

Communication systems are recognized for being of foremost importance in the structure of organizations. If an intervener makes changes in the communications channels he is likely to make major changes in the entire structure of an organization.

Knowledge of one's role as a school social worker first requires knowledge of one's focus for social work practice—a framework for conceptualizing the phenomenon into which social workers intervene. Within the general systems framework, William Gordon has made a substantial contribution in providing a conceptualization "with which there can be intellectual identification as well as value commitment, a conceptualization that provides social work with a set of integrative and generative ideas."<sup>10</sup>

Gordon has recognized the value of the profession's traditional simultaneous dual focus on man and his environment or the person-in-his-life-situation complex. He has developed other constructs that make it possible to use this focus to assess practice situations in ways that it is possible to test outcomes.

By clearly focusing on the phenomenon into which we are intervening, it is possible to know whether or not our interventions have made a difference.

Gordon's focus of practice for social work is the transaction between coping behaviors (whether individual, group, community or organization) and the quality of the impinging environment. In Gordon's conceptualization, he states that the "central target of technical social work practice is matching something in person and situation."<sup>11</sup> This corresponds to Costin's model of school social work in which she states: "This model... emphasizes the likes and interactions between pupil characteristics and school-community conditions and practices."<sup>12</sup>

Once the worker is clear about his focus as a social worker, he is ready to turn his attentions to knowledge of his specific agency. The above discussion of systems concepts, organizational variables and their application provides a foundation for considering one's position in an agency. A major question for the worker is: Are you sure that administration and staff perceive your focus in the system?

The first step in establishing one's role functions, is to have knowledge of his own skills, the service plan that one expects to implement and the ability to assess the needs of the organization in which he plans to function. Contracts are a helpful tool for communicating one's proposed service plan to others in the organization. In this way one can clearly state goals to involve school administration and staff in the action system through the contract. Having formulated a contract, a plan for intervention is needed.

Intervention means any systematic effort to bring about change in a system, whether individual, population, organization, community or inter-system networks. Practitioners need to make decisions as to which size system or systems they will direct their change efforts. Often in practice, one begins with one size unit and moves to another. The writer will consider some major intervention tasks for school social workers with several size units.

In school social work with the focus of the school-community pupil model, (Costin, 1975) the social worker's efforts are more often directed toward groups or target populations than individuals. There are, however, occasions in which it is most appropriate to intervene with the individual system. For example, when a child is unable to cope in the mainstream in the public schools, relocation is necessary. A social worker intervening in relation to the individual pupil may need to find means to add to that individual's resources or repertoire of coping behaviors. Often, however, other children would profit from the same resources. Examples are: special tutoring, technical training or a behavior modification program.

Intervention tasks with the population system may be to prepare and provide additional resources for a group. Preventive measures are often useful with this unit. Examples may be



preparing sixth graders for junior high school, developing resources for children of teenage parents, preparing parents and children for entry into school. In addition to a preventive program, other resources may be needed such as special educational programs or other alternative modes of education.

Special intervention skills are needed to enable individual members of population groups to participate in the established programs. To enable individuals to participate, they must know why they need the program, and if at all possible it must be perceived as non-labeling.

Intervention in the organizational system is often directed at making the organization more facilitative to the individual or population systems. It is often helpful to initiate experimental programs as a first step in bringing about organizational change. This approach is less threatening to the organization because it is time-limited. Yet if the experimental program proves to be useful it is often maintained as a part of the organization.

Interorganizational interventions may be directed at establishing cooperative responsibilities between organizations. They may be directed at reducing conflict between organizations. Interventions at this level are more difficult because the social worker does not have a clear cut role in each organization which may be involved in the intervention, nor does the worker have clear-cut lines of authority.

Examples of interorganizational interventions are:

- 1) drug abuse programs in the public schools that are jointly developed by a local mental health center and the public schools
- and 2) a program for pregnant teenage girls which is jointly developed by the school social worker, Planned Parenthood and the public health nurse.

Before the social worker can state specific objectives and goals he/she needs to know how the unit to be changed fits together. The previous discussion of systems concepts and organizational variables are helpful in viewing the situation. In addition, Bartlett has stated: "In examining specific instances of practice, we observe that social workers characteristically begin by trying to understand the situation from the view point of the people involved in it. Certainly those people who are involved in a situation play a major role in setting goals and objectives."

Workers and clients must decide on priorities and make assessments of feasibility. Alleviating immediate distress and providing for basic necessities will always be priorities.<sup>14</sup> In addition, identification and/or anticipation of the effects of intervention on other parts of the system must be considered.

While the idea of interdependence of objects in the system is basic to the system model, it seems important to restate this idea as we consider strategy. When one aspect of a social system is changed it will have consequences for other aspects and new problems may be brought into focus. While social workers cannot be "fortune tellers," it is possible for them to develop

greater sensitivity to the probable effects of change. One area in which greater sensitivity is developing is around temporary placement of behaviorally disturbed children in special classes. It is recognized that once the child is removed from the mainstream that it is extremely difficult to return him unless careful planning has occurred from the beginning of the special class placement. Such plans as regular visitation back into the regular class setting make re-entry much easier for both the student and the regular class. Personnel who can contribute to this re-entry should be identified.

Ease of re-entry is only one reason that Costin has stated that a team of pupil specialists is essential to the model of school-community-pupil relationship. There should be a core of team members and the team should be able to identify others "who will provide specialized information or perform specific tasks."<sup>15</sup> No one employee can meet the total needs of a school system. Social workers have long been recognized for their ability to organize resources. This is an important skill in school social work.

The social worker needs to plan the steps to be taken to make sure that any positive changes that have been accomplished will continue. Planning for stability of change requires an assessment of any aspects of the situation that may counteract the change process. Perhaps even more important is locating and developing supports that may be needed after the social worker has terminated.

In evaluating the needs with regard to stabilization of change, the social worker will explore the increased ability of the client (whether individual, population or organization) to cope with its own situation. He will try to evaluate how, as a result of the planned change effort, the client has increased in his capacity to cope with similar situations in the future.

The idea of being accountable at all phases of an intervention is prevalent in our recent literature, yet, its meaning is still vague. Perhaps it can be best understood by asking: 1) For what? 2) To whom? 3) At what cost? and 4) What results?

To be accountable "for what" one has to have had clear cut goals and objectives that can be measured. To be accountable "to whom" one has to be clear who the client is: also, the worker is accountable to his agency, the public, his profession and himself. It is also important to evaluate the "cost" in time and money. "What results" must be evaluated both in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. The all important question is, "What was accomplished?"

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Hearn, (ed). The General Systems Approach: Contributions Toward an Holistic Conception of Social Work (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1969), p.2.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Chin, "The Utility of Systems Models and Developmental Models for Practitioners" W. Bennis, K. Benne and R. Chin, The Planning of Changes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961) pp.201-214.

<sup>3</sup>A.D. Hall and R.E. Fagen, "Definition of a System" ed. Walter Buckley Modern Systems Research for Behavioral Scientists (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1968) p.2.

<sup>4</sup>Chin, p.203.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>H.C. Triandis, "notes on the Design of Organizations" in J.D. Thompson (ed) Approaches to Organizational Design (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh press, 1966) pp. 57-102.

<sup>7</sup>John Wax, "Power Theory and Institutional Change" in R.W. Klenk and R.M. Ryan The Practice of Social Work (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1974) pp. 319-320.

<sup>8</sup>J. Glidewell, et al. "Socialization and Social Structure in the Classroom," in L. Hoffman and M. Hoffman (eds.) Review of Child Development Research, Vol. II (New York: Russell Sage, 1966) pp. 221-256.

<sup>9</sup>Stanley Murrell, Community Psychology and Social Systems (New York: Behavioral Publications, 1974) p. 118.

<sup>10</sup>William E. Gordon, "Basic Constructs For an Integrative and Generative Conception of Social Work" in Gordon Hearn, The General Systems Approach: Contributions Toward and Holistic Conception of Social Work (Council on Social Work Education, 1969) p.5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid p.6.

<sup>12</sup>Lela B. Costin, "School Social Work Practice: A New Model" (Social Work, March, 1975) p. 136.

<sup>13</sup>Harriett M. Bartlett; The Common Base of Social Work Practice (New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1970) p.18.

<sup>14</sup>Allen Vincus and Anne Minahan, Social Work Practice: Model and Method (Itasca, Ill.: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1973) pp. 109-112

Costin, p. 38.